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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000987

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: BUSINESS AS USUAL
IN BAKU AND BEYOND

REF: A. BAKU 981

1B. BAKU 924

1C. BAKU 813

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11. (SBU) Election day in Azerbaijan, based on informal Embassy observation in Baku and the immediate surroundings, was generally unremarkable, with an absence of enthusiasm on the part of the population and a heavy dose of cynicism among voters and non-voters alike. Polling stations in the metropolitan area opened at 8:00am with only a trickle of people on hand to vote in the nation's third round of municipal elections. Embassy observers noted slow streams of voters coming forth in the hours before lunch, with precinct captains reporting turnout at mid-day ranging from 10-40 percent. By mid-afternoon, many polling stations appeared to be empty, except for election day staff. Polling stations will remain open until 7:00pm.

12. (SBU) Ballots for the nationwide elections differed by precinct, with each district aiming to elect up to 19 municipal council members from a long list of candidates. The ballots themselves, which were about one meter long, displayed upwards of 40-60 candidates, the vast majority of which represented the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party or parties acting as surrogates. Each candidate was listed by full name, with a very brief biography, including party affiliation. According to eyewitnesses and other observers, voters were hard-pressed to identify or recognize candidates, and could hardly be expected to choose 19 council members in a reasonable, methodical manner.

13. (SBU) Official Azerbaijani election observers, arranged by the Central Election Commission (CEC), were on hand at polling stations, but did not always appear to be taking their positions seriously. Polling stations in Azerbaijan tend to be at schools, institutes and universities, which were closed for teaching today. School staff, including teachers and professors, in turn commonly served as official observers. The observers, in any case, seemed to know one another, and tended, regardless of party affiliation, not to contradict the precinct captain or one another. In some cases, official observers did not know which party they were assigned to represent. In other cases, official observers said that they were representing the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, but their badges listed a separate, relatively unknown political party.

14. (SBU) Embassy observers noted numerous irregularities and violations, some of which were thought to be insignificant, such as the premature cutting of corners off of ballots in advance of voter turnout, more than one person at a time in a voting booth, and improper inking procedures. Other observations were more problematic, such as multiple ballots bunched up and folded together in ballot boxes and an

inability to count the number of participants from voter registration sheets. Embassy observers did not witness extraordinary "get out the vote" measures, such as voters arriving by bus. Opposition leaders, however, complained to the press that some voters in regions outside Baku were denied entry to polling stations, and also suggested that certain groups of people were voting in multiple districts.

¶5. (SBU) Morning television showed the President, his wife and daughters voting in the Sabayil region of Baku. The President did not make a statement before or after voting. CEC Chairman Panahov in press conference last night said he expected turnout of 30-40 percent. Polling station chiefs today reflected those figures, noting that 30-40 percent as a de facto benchmark. The CEC's mid-day estimates showed that perhaps only 17 percent of voters had participated by 12:00. Meanwhile, around Baku workers prepared for the other business of the day -- President Aliyev's birthday later this week -- putting up new flags and posterboards.

¶6. (SBU) Embassy observers universally noted that Azerbaijanis almost collectively have little idea what this election is about. Residents of Baku and surrounding regions do not understand the roles of municipal councils, and have little confidence in councils to represent their interests. "Man on the street" interviews suggested that Baku residents do not believe that these councils "do anything", and suggest that council members are only interested in zoning issues and real estate transactions. Some Baku residents noted that apartment blocs already have building superintendents, and thus local councilmen are not needed to replicate that effort. Rather, these residents said, these building superintendents should be made more accountable to local communities. No one expressed any hope that municipal council members would contribute to or augment this effort.

Comment - Process vs. Procedure

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¶7. (SBU) Local press and international observers tend to focus on voting day irregularities and violations. In today's vote, however, nothing much was left to chance on election day. Rather, everything but the final results seemed to be arranged ahead of time. Most notably, the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party dominated the candidate lists, and thus the President's party pretty much assured itself the majority of seats on councils. All that was left for election day, subject to fraud perhaps, was voter turnout. On that front, authorities seemed satisfied with 30-40 percent participation.

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